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ABSTRACT

This paper examines ongoing changes related to appropriate methods and practices in Aboriginal educational research, including community control of research based on the principle of self-determination. This assertion of control includes the redefinition of relationships in the research process; appropriate initiation of research projects; establishing adequate and acceptable funding arrangements; development of appropriate consultation and negotiation procedures; construction and implementation of appropriate research methodologies; concerns about the appropriation of knowledge; establishment of accountability procedures; and proper recognition of rights in terms of ownership, copyright, and publication. Historically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia have been subjected to a range of inappropriate, unacceptable, and degrading research methodologies. Another concern is the extraction of knowledge from Aboriginal communities that benefits individual researchers, but provides little benefit to the community. An appropriate and powerful research methodology is participatory action research, which allows critical thought to be transformed into action through community decision making. The initiation and development of research proposals that are based on principles of community control and self-determination require that people have appropriate and sufficient opportunity to consider issues and make meaningful decisions for themselves and in collaboration with others. Most important, Aboriginal decision-making processes and cultural obligations must be respected and adhered to at all times when conducting educational research. (LP)

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National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander
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Community Control and Self Determination in Aboriginal Education Research: The Changed Roles, Relationships and Responsibilities of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Researchers and Aboriginal Communities

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Aboriginal people now understand that if schools are to serve the political, social and economic purposes of their own people, the school as an institution needs to be accommodated within Aboriginal Society itself. Only when the cultural orientation of the school becomes Yolngu will schools become integral to the movement of Aborigines towards self-determination. The decolonisation of schools in Aboriginal communities is the challenge for Aborigines now.

Wesley Lanhupuy

White people have destroyed a lot of our culture, they have stolen our land, and stolen our children. They have learnt our languages to use for their own advantage. They will not be allowed to steal our knowledge. Aboriginal people can no longer afford to share the intimacy of their identity.

Barbara Shaw

Introduction

Aboriginal people throughout Australia are saying loudly and clearly that enough is enough in respect of inappropriate and offensive research methods and practices that are largely associated with non-Aboriginal researchers conducting research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families and communities. In this paper we will examine the changes that are taking place in Aboriginal education research. Community control of research is now being asserted in order to confront continuing forms of social and cultural domination and imposition.

This assertion of control includes the redefinition of relationships in the research process, appropriate initiation of research projects, establishing adequate and acceptable funding

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arrangements, development of appropriate consultation and negotiation procedures, construction and implementation of appropriate research methodologies, concerns about the appropriation of knowledge, establishment of accountability procedures and proper recognition of rights in terms of ownership, copyright and publication.

A radically different research paradigm is emerging from this redefinition of roles, relationships and responsibilities. The key features of this paradigm involve community control over research processes based on the principle of self-determination.

Concerns about inappropriate and offensive research

Historically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been subjected to a range of inappropriate, unacceptable, devious and degrading research methodologies. We have been, and still are, frequently considered to be objects for research and continue to be put under the microscope of the social scientists. Researchers have tended to conform to this neo-colonial and paternalistic mentality and, in most cases, gained individual rewards through professional advancement.

This paper draws attention to such harmful approaches to research that are both offensive and abusive. Outdated research instruments and methodologies that are still being used should be contrasted with the culturally appropriate approaches that can be practised by communities themselves when conducting community-driven research in Aboriginal community contexts.

Non-Aboriginal researchers need to come to terms with the fact that the handing out of questionnaires and the "Avon" approach of door knocking is not only offensive and a nuisance, but places a question mark on their integrity as academics and ability as researchers.

It needs to be emphasised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge has been extracted. Knowledge has been taken like the mining industry has taken minerals from our lands and transformed into academic text to benefit individuals and institutions. In this metaphor the researcher can be compared to the miner and the communities to the mine.

The important question is: "Why should individual researchers gain more than a community of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people through a process of one-way research?"

At the heart of this issue are concerns about power and control. Illegitimate research is carried out on Aboriginal people and the knowledge is manipulated and interpreted in terms of data, which tends to reduce the significance of that knowledge to being bits of information to be used in an academic game for personal and institutional advancement. Just as the mining industry has benefited from mineral extraction from Aboriginal land, the academic industry in its exploitation of Aboriginal knowledge, has also benefited from a similar process of extraction.

A radically different research paradigm

It was argued by the NAEC in 1985 that "Research in Aboriginal Education is important. Emphasis should be placed on action-oriented research and on research relevant to the needs of Aboriginal people as defined by Aboriginal people". In particular, the NAEC emphasised that "research should be conducted substantially by and for Aboriginal people" not on them... within culturally intelligible and acceptable frames of reference and should secure benefits for Aboriginal people (NAEC, 1985).

This has recently been endorsed by the Schools Council who make the recommendation "That the data collection process through the National Aboriginal Education Policy be accelerated and that provision be made in the policy to allocate some funds (sic) for appropriate research especially in the early education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In both cases these people (sic) must be involved in the process of defining the data base, defining research areas and choosing appropriate researchers to undertake these tasks". (Schools Council, 1992)

The Schools Council is therefore, despite the use of some objectionable language accepting and supportive of Aboriginal demands for an end to inappropriate and offensive research methodologies that have largely been conducted by non-Aboriginal researchers on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families and communities.

The position referred to above is concerned about challenging the relations of domination that have been associated with Aboriginal disempowerment and marginalisation. Self-determination is the principal justification and rationale for an alternative practice and methodology.

At the first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Conference in 1991, Errol West put this position very bluntly when he stated "The battle for power is about not just our right to say what should happen, for that has been delivered to us through the funding programs horticulturist goals. It is over possession of our intellectual property, contemporary and historical. It is about prising open the fists of white academics who for years have been universally recognised as the experts on anything from cultural to causes. It is about us saying No!!" (West, 1991)

This battle over power and control in the area of research is essentially about denying continuing access to community knowledge when such activities seeks to exploit this knowledge by using it for purposes other than the advancement of goals and strategies established through community decision-making processes. In other words, if self-determination is to mean anything it must be about communities using their collective participatory and collaborative decision-making processes to ensure that power and control is exercised by the community and in the interests of the community.

We want to emphasise that the principle and practice of self-determination is fundamentally oppositional. It opposes and challenges the relations of domination that have for over two hundred years ensnared and disempowered indigenous peoples. Self-determination is therefore an uncomprisingly emancipatory and empowering process and project.

Oppositional theories and discourses provide a useful and important supportive framework for critical practices and discourses that are concerned with challenging the legitimacy of the dominant order and breaking its hold over social and political arrangements. The endeavour of oppositional theories and discourses is to transform critical thought into emancipatory action. The concern is with those processes and ways of relating to each other that promote enlightenment, empowerment and political action in order to challenge the multiple oppressions that surround us and impact on us.

The challenge for us as critical intellectuals and cultural workers is to find ways of applying these theories and discourses without creating further impositions, as Michael Apple has emphasised (Apple, 1991). This requires processes that are supportive, facilitatory and collaborative and allow people to speak and act for themselves in a "self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action". (Apple, ibid)

Participatory action research

The most appropriate and powerful research methodology for achieving such a self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action, in our view, is participatory action research. As McTaggart has shown "Authentic participation in research means sharing in the way research is conceptualised, practiced and brought to bear on the life world. It means ownership responsible agency in the production of knowledge and the improvement of practice. Mere involvement implies none of this, and creates the risk of co-option and exploitation of people in the realisation of the plans of others. (McTaggart, 1989)

Participatory action research is most definitely not about academics from the university system doing research on people and making them the objects of research. Nor is it about creating the illusion of participation and involvement which can be discerned in much of the research commissioned by governments and their bureaucracies which involve "the co-option of people into the research, development and dissemination approach invented by a coalition of policy-makers and social scientists with a primary interest in maintaining control" (McTaggart, ibid).

Participatory action research confronts head-on the false claims of scientific rationality and objectivity put forward by researchers operating from within other more traditional and conservative paradigms. The manipulative social relations that characterise the traditional researcher-researched relationship have no place in participatory action research, which operates

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on the basis of collective and collaborative decision-making, implementation and analysis.

The essential features of such an approach involve:

- the improvement of social practice by changing it and learning from the consequences of those changes;
- authentic participation through which people work towards the improvement of their own practices;
- a self-reflective spiral of planning, acting (or implementing plans), systematically observing and reflecting;
- collaboration between those directly involved in and affected by the practices concerned;
- the establishment of self-critical communities of people participating and collaborating in all phases of the research process, (aimed at building "communities committed to enlightening themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action and consequence in their own situation, and emancipating themselves from the institutional and personal constraints which limit their power to live their own legitimate educational and social values");
- a systematic learning process in which people act deliberately, whilst remaining open to surprises and responsive to opportunities, and engage in critically informed, committed action;
- theorising about practices and being inquisitive about participants' circumstances, action and consequences in their own lives and making such theorising available to critical scrutiny throughout the research process;
- putting practices, ideas and assumptions about institutions to the test by gathering compelling evidence;
- keeping records which describe what is happening as accurately as possible and collecting and analysing judgements, reactions and impressions about what is going on;
- a process of objectification of participants' own experience (for example, by keeping a personal journal in which the progress of the research is charted);
- making changes that are part of a political process that may create individual and institutional resistances that will need to be dealt with;
- critical analyses of the situations in which participants work and/or live;
- starting small and progressively working toward more extensive changes, reforms and powerful questions (based on McTaggart, ibid).

Oppositional theory and discourse, as developed through participatory action research, engages participants in a struggle over power and control in relation to ideas, practices, relationships and forms of organisation. Through such oppositional work the notions and aspirations associated with self-determination can be realised in practice and embodied in the social rituals and relationships of daily life.

Transforming critical thought into emancipatory action

Michael Apple has recently emphasised the need for critical intellectuals to ensure that they work in support of the efforts of people to speak for themselves without being impositional: "We must shift the role of critical intellectuals from being universalizing spokespersons to acting as cultural workers whose task is to take away the barriers that prevent people from speaking for themselves... all critical enquiry is fundamentally dialogic and involves a mutually educative experience. It must respond to the experiences, desires and needs of oppressed peoples by focusing on their understandings of their situations. Its ultimate goal is to stimulate a self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action at the same time that it is not impositional". (Apple, 1991)

Central to this position is the effort to transform critical thought into emancipatory action through the activation of community decision-making processes and the unleashing of an energy dynamic that creates radically different ways of conceptualising about and implementing educational reform. This is referred to by Hall as the knowledge creating abilities that are so often denied most people by conventional forms of research. Hall proposes six criteria for research that seeks to break the "monopoly of knowledge":

"1. A research process can be of immediate and direct benefit to a community (as opposed to serving merely as the basis for an academic paper or obscure policy analysis).

2. A research process should involve the community or population from the formulation of the problem to the discussion of how to seek solutions and the interpretation of findings.

3. The research process should be seen as part of a total educational experience which serves to establish community needs and increase awareness and commitment within the community.

4. The research process should be viewed as a dialectical process, a dialogue over time and not as a static picture from one point in time.

5. The object of the research process, like the object of the educational process, should be the liberation of human creative potential and the mobilisation of human resources for the solution of social problems.

6. A research process has ideological implications. Knowledge is power." (Hall, 1978)

An outstanding example of this effort to transform critical thought into emancipatory action is provided by the work being carried out by the community at Yirrkala in North-East Arnhemland, who make the point that "We have experienced the process of participatory research using our Yolngu forms of interaction and learning and have subsequently applied our findings in our community, as part of our development of an appropriate Yolngu pedagogy and curriculum... Working together and using our own approaches we see that we can work to develop ways to overcome the huge difficulties in front of us... (We would) draw attention to the importance of unity, the strength that comes from unity and the valuable outcomes that come from adopting a collective, cooperative approach to our endeavours" (Marika, Ngurruwutthun and White, 1989)

This has involved the community in directing and controlling a process which has the following features. It:

"· Makes explicit that our learning/researching community at Yirrkala requires an environment in which collective responsibility constitutes the main theme of our work... so that we contribute to the development of our community itself.

· Locates our research in a cooperative working community that has got ownership and control of the work... to bring us to a position where we can step back from our practice and reflect on the things that we do.

· Is based on an understanding of the fundamentally important role that negotiation plays in the research process. Our work always requires negotiation between the respective groups... so that our Ngalapal (elder thinking people) are sure we are not doing things for ourselves as individuals... The process of negotiation we use as learners earns us rewards by giving us

  · Recognition as learners in our community... to develop further skills and knowledge from Ngalapal... in order to maintain our culture and pass it on to the other learners that will follow us.

  · Gives us respect as teachers because we are humble as learners... and that we value learning about our Yolngu reality.

· Is built on explicit understandings of reciprocity as expressed by 'bala lili'... Bala lili means giving and then getting something back.

· Establishes common objectives – our starting point is always to negotiate the right place to start... The process of establishing our common objectives gets us to share ideas, critically analyse each other's suggestions from a Yolngu point of view, and agree to the plan. This helps us and the

Ngalapal reflect on the things that we do before we make new plans, and establish new directions to go.

- Assists confidence building as part of this process... In our planning meetings we work to develop each other's active participation. In our formal education way Yolngu are expected (even tested) by being required by Ngalapal to perform in public. Because of this we have developed guidelines for the behaviour of observers of Yuta Yolngu at ceremonies and times when people are being 'tested', particularly when someone makes a mistake... Confidence building through participation also helps us to understand and appreciate our Yolngu cause." (from Marika, Ngurruwutthun and White, 1989, and quoted by McTaggart)

Community control and self-determination

The initiation and development of research proposals that are based on the principles of community control and self-determination require that people have appropriate and sufficient opportunity to consider issues and make meaningful decisions for themselves and in collaboration with others. Most importantly, Aboriginal decision making processes and cultural obligations must be respected and adhered to at all times. This is a complex issue as there are different representative groups, organisations and individuals who work in support of or represent communities at different levels and for different purposes. In working respectfully within this context researchers need to be sensitive to the requirements and responses provided and follow through with appropriate action. This is vital if consultation and negotiation are to mean anything.

As we have pointed out in a previous paper: "A special place in this process is held by the elders, who by virtue of their wisdom, knowledge and status provide important guidance and direction. As David Suzuki has emphasised: 'We need a radically different way of relating ourselves to the support systems of the planet. My experiences with Aboriginal people have convinced me, both as a scientist and as an environmentalist, of the power and relevance of their knowledge and world view in a time of imminent global catastrophe'. (Knudsen and Suzuki, 1992). We share this view." (Stewart and Williams, 1992)

The funding of research projects has been and continues to be a major difficulty facing communities and researchers. In the recent paper on 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education in the Early Years', the Schools Council stated that research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education "is not currently conducted at a level and frequency which is desirable".(Schools Council, 1992) Part of the reason advanced in the report relates to the difficulty researchers face in winning research funding in the extremely limited and competitive schemes that sponsor research, such as the Australian Research Council's small and large grants. Even when funding is provided, there is the issue to be dealt with

relating to meeting the requirements of the funding body. This is especially problematic for projects that have been commissioned by governments and their bureaucracies.

It is also the case in projects which require approval from authorities to conduct research within institutional settings. There are no easy solutions to these dilemmas and each project needs to find ways of dealing with them consistent with the principles and procedures which have been outlined above.

This brings us to the issue of accountability and ownership within research projects, including publication rights and copyright over research outcomes. This is also a complex issue area which we will not explore in any detail at this time. However, we do wish to state our own commitments based on the policy which has been developed by the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney. In line with the principles of community control and self-determination appropriate and adequate consultation and negotiation must take place with all participants, co-researchers, communities and their representative organisations, with clearly stated terms of agreement as an outcome. In all cases it is essential that restrictions and other requirements related to the conduct and outcomes of a project are respected and adhered to.

Conclusion

The theme of this conference has been "Maintaining the Momentum". We have tried to show in this paper how developments in the theorising and practice of community control and self-determination in Aboriginal education research reveal the potential for the further development of empowering and emancipatory practices.

The key features of this new paradigm include the redefinition of relationships in the research process, appropriate initiation of research projects, development of appropriate consultation and negotiation procedures, construction and implementation of appropriate research methodologies, establishment of accountability procedures, and proper recognition of rights in terms of ownership, copyright and publication. At the heart of this redefinition are concerns about power and control. Above all, it is about communities using their collective participatory and collaborative decising making processes to ensure that power and control is exercised by the community and in the interests of the community.

It is our view that such approaches are essential if we are to move beyond the rhetoric and work towards the achievement of real community control and self-determination in Aboriginal education research.

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